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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR, CONVINCED STREET VIOLENCE IS
COMING, PLOTS ARMY REACTION

REF: A. 08 BEIRUT 2009

[1](#)B. IIR 6 857 0085 08

BEIRUT 00000016 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Citing sources close to March 8 and noting that Hizballah's Wafiq Safa met with Michel Aoun for three hours, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr told the Ambassador on 1/4 that he expected March 8-prompted street action to break out and turn violent by the end of January. He said that he and LAF Commander Michel Sleiman were working on plans by which the army could concentrate on protecting Beirut, Mt. Lebanon, and the south, even if that meant some restrictions on LAF capabilities to combat violence in the north and Biqa' Valley. He admitted seeing some advantages to March 8-Aoun forces taking to the street: unlike the ongoing sit-in aimed at toppling a cabinet that a large segment of the population loathes, new protests could easily be portrayed as against democracy and the parliament, lessening the popular appeal of the protests. Murr insisted that the LAF would be able to protect the U.S. Embassy in the event of demonstrations he expected to see in Awkar.

[1](#)2. (C) Murr continued to praise both Michel Sleiman and the army, saying that he hears from Syrian contacts that Damascus now seeks as Lebanon's president former Foreign Minister Jean Obeid, who Murr said has promised the Syrians to stop the Special Tribunal. Murr believed that Lebanon's presidential vacuum would thus continue indefinitely. On the 12/12 assassination of BG Francois Hajj, Murr said that he was convinced Hizballah implemented Syrian orders, and Murr expressed hope that BG Jean Kahwagi would now become the front-runner for next LAF Commander. End summary.

HIZBALLAH TO PROVIDE BEHIND-THE-SCENES SUPPORT
TO WIDESPREAD, VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS SOON

[1](#)3. (C) In a 90-minute one-on-one meeting with the Ambassador on 1/4, Elias Murr claimed that the "moderate tone" of Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's 1/2 television interview did not succeed in disguising very real

threats of violence. Hizballah, hoping not to ignite widespread Sunni reaction, would not be visible in the forefront of street action, but the organization would provide arms, logistical support, and direction to a large number of "spontaneous" demonstrations Murr believed would break out and turn violent before the end of January. Murr reported that sources in the army contingent protecting Michel Aoun informed him that, soon after the Ambassador's meeting earlier that day with Michel Aoun, Hizballah's hard-line security chief Wafiq Safa' met with Aoun and his son-in-law Gebran Bassil for more than three hours. Probably, Murr speculated, Aoun intentionally waited for a planning meeting with Safa until after the Ambassador's meeting, so that Aoun could (as he did) tell the Ambassador that there were no plans for what opposition escalation might be. (The Aoun meeting will be reported septel.)

14. (C) Besides eroding March 14 power and popularity, the purpose of the demonstrations will be to discredit and weaken the army and destroy Michel Sleiman's presidential candidacy, Murr said. The March 8-Aoun forces calculate that they can make the army blink, as it did in the January 23, 2007 protests, or provoke the army into shooting Lebanese. Either way the army's behavior will be portrayed as scandalous, particularly if Lebanese protesters are hurt by the LAF protecting the U.S. Embassy. But, Murr said, the Nahr al-Barid fight was, in a way, a "gift from God" -- the army is more disciplined and more united than in January 2007. Army officers are determined not to fall into a March 8-set trap.

MUSING THAT PROBLEMS TO START
WITH PALESTINIANS IN THE BIQA' VALLEY

15. (C) Murr said that he had met with LAF Commander Sleiman earlier in the day to go over preliminary plans for the

BEIRUT 00000016 002.2 OF 004

demonstrations Murr believes are inevitable. The two men calculated that, based on information they deem credible that the Syrians are stockpiling weapons in the Qosaya and Helwa PFLP-GC military bases just inside Lebanon along the Syrian border in the Biqa', problems will start there. The Syrians probably calculate that the LAF would rush to deploy troops to face the threat from the Palestinian terrorists, as happened with Nahr al-Barid. With the LAF distracted in the Biqa', then "social" protests would break out in Beirut and in Tripoli that would quickly become widespread. Al-Qaida-looking operations might be conducted against UNIFIL. Palestinians may launch something against northern Israel. Groups allied with Syria will spark problems in the Palestinian refugee camps. Protests will be launched against the U.S. Embassy. And the situation will quickly turn chaotic.

CONCENTRATING ON CONTROLLING THREE AREAS:
GREATER BEIRUT, MT. LEBANON, AND THE SOUTH

16. (C) So Murr claimed that he and Sleiman had decided not to redeploy forces but to have the LAF units already in the various regions of Lebanon deal with problems that emerge there. The goal will be to control the situation in three strategic regions, Murr claimed: Greater Beirut (including key institutions like the Grand Serail), the Mt. Lebanon area, and what Murr called "the 1701 area," where UNIFIL is deployed. That means that it may take longer to contain problems in the Biqa' and in the north, areas adjacent to Syria and thus more vulnerable to Damascus-originated mischief, but "we must pick our battles."

17. (C) Lebanon can live with problems in the north and the Biqa', but the government and March 14 will be destroyed if the situation spins out of control in any of the three strategic regions. Murr also acknowledged that the army

would not be able to keep access to the airport open in the face of determined Hizballah opposition. But he did not believe that Hizballah would close the airport for long, given how unpopular such a move would be. "Our policy," Murr said, "will be let the army win" in Beirut, Mt. Lebanon, and the south.

18. (C) Murr admitted that, at one level, he almost relished the outbreak of demonstrations. He believed that Hizballah and Michel Aoun were setting themselves up for a fall by resorting to the street. Protests now will not be the same as the ongoing sit-in downtown, he claimed. There is general popular discontent among a large part of the population with the Siniora cabinet, so the anti-Siniora protests are tolerated. But, now, new demonstrations can easily be portrayed as being against democracy, the parliament, and elections. That will not have the same appeal, even among March 8 followers, Murr mused. March 8 supporters loathe the Siniora cabinet, but they will not have popular backing in protesting the parliament and democracy.

CONVINCED THERE WILL BE ANTI-US PROTESTS
BUT ALSO THAT THE LAF WILL PROTECT THE EMBASSY

19. (C) The Ambassador asked about the Embassy. Murr said that we should assume that there will be protests, perhaps linked to President Bush's regional trip, around the Embassy. Hizballah will claim that President Bush is coming to Lebanon and that they have to stop his arrival, by closing the airport and demonstrating against the Embassy. We should not, he said, assume that they will be as peaceful as the weekly series of demonstrations two years ago that shut down central Awkar but posed only irritation, not threats, to the Embassy itself.

110. (C) Murr expressed confidence in the army's ability to contain the demonstrations. He also noted that there were "popular limits" to anti-Embassy demonstrations, given the Embassy's location in the heart of the Christian suburbs of Beirut: Aoun will not be able to mobilize enough people to pose a serious risk, since the Christians in general don't want violence. As for Hizballah, its leaders realize that the residents of Awkar would deeply resent a massive and violent Shia influx in their part of Lebanon. Their reaction

BEIRUT 00000016 003.2 OF 004

could diminish Aoun's popularity or even put the Aoun-Hizballah alliance at risk, an outcome Hizballah wishes to avoid at all costs. So "don't worry," Murr said. "The Embassy will be fine. Thank God you didn't move (to the proposed NEC location), for we couldn't help you there."

SLEIMAN: TALKS BAD BUT DOES GOOD

111. (C) Turning to presidential elections, Murr said that he did not sense that Michel Sleiman will pull himself out of the race, even though he realizes that the pro-Syrian forces presumed to be his allies are making it very difficult for him to be elected. He praised how well Sleiman is handling an awkward situation. The Ambassador asked about Sleiman's public statement the previous day that the army doctrine (which includes "protection of the resistance" as a goal) will never be changed. "Don't worry about it," Murr said; "it doesn't mean anything." Murr cited several examples where, in his analysis, Sleiman initially said he "won't do but then does." Look at his actions rather than listen to his words, Murr said, contrasting Sleiman's behavior favorably with many March 14 politicians, who say they "will do but then don't."

BUT JEAN OBEID NOW SYRIA'S CANDIDATE
(AND CLAIMS THAT OBEID WILL STOP TRIBUNAL)

¶12. (C) Answering the Ambassador's question about whether the pro-Syrian foot-dragging on Sleiman was intended to block him or just gain more concessions, Murr said that he was convinced the Syrians truly do not want Sleiman. Citing contacts of his father Michel (who has long maintained a close relationship with Syria), Murr said that he has increasing evidence that Syria's Lebanese allies, surely reflecting Damascus' thinking in his view, now want former Foreign Minister Jean Obeid as president. (PM Siniora, as noted ref a, has told us the same thing.) With more than 30 years of dealing with Obeid, Syria's proxies in Lebanon find him more reliable and predictable than Sleiman. Moreover, Obeid has reportedly given Damascus a written commitment that, as president, he will find bureaucratic ways to thwart the tribunal, by starving it of resources, preventing the handover of suspects or witnesses or evidence, etc. "Obeid told the Syrians that the tribunal will come into effect when Rustom Ghazaleh is 80 years old."

¶13. (C) The Obeid candidacy will remain hidden until the opportunity presents itself to elect him, Murr claimed. The fact that Obeid does not need a constitutional amendment helps pave the way, since March 8-Aoun would not have to recognize implicitly the authority of the cabinet (which must prepare a constitutional amendment) in electing Obeid. Even though the March 14 Christians and Walid Jumblatt are adamantly opposed to Obeid, Saad Hariri, eager to become PM, might be tempted, especially as Rafiq Hariri's widow Nazek likes Obeid. Hariri, Berri, and Hizballah could muster sufficient votes to get Obeid elected, Murr speculated. Even Michel Aoun, if he sees he will never become president, would prefer Obeid to Sleiman, since Obeid would be unlikely to draw supporters away from Aoun's orbit.

PRESIDENTIAL VACUUM TO CONTINUE

¶14. (C) But, Murr sighed, the presidential vacuum is probably going to continue indefinitely. He did not place much hope in Arab League diplomacy persuading Syria to instruct its allies to proceed with an unconditional election of Sleiman. France and the United States are not willing to take the (unspecified) steps to get Syria on board. On balance, it is probably better to have the vacuum than a bad president like Obeid, Murr concluded. But unfortunately "we must prepare for the consequences" of the extended vacuum. Besides what he sees as the inevitability of demonstrations, he also noted that the Siniora cabinet risks erosion in its authority and that March 14 Christians will become increasingly worried that their own credibility weakens the longer the vacuum persists. The financial and economic situation of the country is truly worrying, and "we could be bankrupt" by the second quarter. Uncharacteristically, Murr

BEIRUT 00000016 004.2 OF 004

said that he did not know when the Ambassador asked how long he thought it would be before presidential elections.

HIZBALLAH BELIEVED TO BE INVOLVED IN HAJJ ASSASSINATION

¶15. (C) Asked about the investigation into the 12/12 assassination of BG Francois Hajj, Murr said that he was convinced that Syria's Assaf Shawkat had ordered the assassination and Hizballah had implemented it. He offered no solid evidence for his opinion, which he claimed was also shared by Sleiman. Hajj was selected to be killed because it would be easy to point an accusatory finger at Fatah al-Islam, given Hajj's involvement as head of operations during the Nahr al-Barid fight. Murr, as he has before, trumpeted the merits of BG Jean Kahwagi, expressing hope that Kahwagi will replace Hajj as the front-runner for the next LAF chief. (See ref B for background on Kahwagi.)

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Murr is an interesting raconteur, who sometimes lets his desire to make a persuasive case get ahead of his command of the facts at hand. His weakness for embellishment is usually most pronounced when he is giving specific details: we remember, for example, his daily reports to us at the beginning of the Nahr al-Barid fight about how far south into the new camp the LAF was progressing. At one point, adding up the various "hundreds of meters" he had told us over the previous week, we admonished him that the army, by his reporting, must already be halfway down the coast to Beirut. But in this meeting, Murr was clearly offering his best analysis rather than inventing details. We don't know that violent demonstrations in January are as inevitable as he believes -- some kind of diplomatic effort, for example, would probably postpone any Hizballah-Aoun plans -- but we recommend taking his analysis seriously.

FELTMAN